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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TAIPEI 001694

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/05/2018

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SUBJECT: PRESIDENT MA YING-JEOU TAKES CRITICISM FOR NIXING  
DALAI LAMA VISIT

Classified By: AIT Director Stephen M. Young,  
Reasons: 1.4 (b/d)

¶1. (C) Summary: The DPP and even some KMT politicians have criticized President Ma Ying-jeou for saying on December 3 that this is not a good time for the Dalai Lama to visit Taiwan. DPP critics charge Ma with yielding to pressure from Beijing, contrasting his agreement to a visit by the PRC's Chen Yunlin but not the highly respected Dalai Lama. Ma, who months earlier said he would welcome a visit by the Dalai Lama, doubtless seeks to prevent damage to cross-Strait relations in hopes Beijing will be more accommodating on WHO/WHA and other issues next year. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) In response to a question, President Ma Ying-jeou told a group of foreign journalists on December 3 that "I think at the current moment, the timing is not appropriate" for a visit by the Dalai Lama. Following negative blowback, the next day Ma's press spokesman tried to do damage control, suggesting "such a visit could be arranged at a proper time in the future." He explained "the President is concerned about the situation in Tibet, but his rejection of a possible visit by the Dalai Lama at present was based on consideration of the nation's overall interests." In a further effort to clarify his position, Ma told an Italian parliamentary delegation on December 5 that Taiwan has always been very friendly to the Dalai Lama, who has visited twice. "However, now is not the best time for him to visit. When the timing is right, we will be happy to see (his visit) take place. The ROC government will welcome him to come to Taiwan to participate in religious activities."

¶3. (SBU) The original question to Ma was triggered by recent media reports that the Dalai Lama was interested in paying what would be his third visit to Taiwan, in 2009. In an interview on November 28 in Dharamsala, India, with Taiwan's Elta TV (a digital media provider), the Dalai Lama said he was considering the possibility of visiting Taiwan next year. According to press reports, the Dalai Lama told Elta TV, "Taiwan-China ties are developing smoothly, so maybe this is a good time....I haven't visited Taiwan for several years, but I have never forgotten Taiwan....What is most precious about Taiwan is Taiwan's democracy. China kept talking about liberating Taiwan, but in fact, it is not unlikely that Taiwan might liberate China's dictatorship with Taiwan's democracy."

14. (SBU) Following Ma's December 3 statement, Dawa Tsering, the Dalai Lama's representative in Taiwan, told the press he had not contacted the Taiwan authorities yet about a possible Dalai Lama visit. Although the Dalai Lama had expressed interest in visiting Taiwan, he explained, there was no specific schedule. Dawa Tsering also referred to the problem of possible pressure from Beijing not to allow visits by the Dalai Lama.

15. (C) As to be expected, Ma's statement sparked heavy criticism from the opposition Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), but even some ruling Kuomintang (KMT) politicians registered objections. Ma's decision handed the currently beleaguered DPP valuable ammunition to use to attack the president and score points with the Taiwan public. The party issued a press release yesterday (Dec. 4) blasting Ma, claiming he had succumbed to Beijing's pressure. DPP members also argued Ma was placing his cross-Strait policy ahead of Taiwan interests and questioned how Ma could invite PRC Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Strait Chairman Chen Yunlin to visit last month but fail to welcome the Dalai Lama, a Nobel Peace Prize winner. Critics also pointed out Ma's inconsistent stance, noting he said in his first press conference after becoming president in May that he would "very much welcome" the Dalai Lama to visit Taiwan as a religious leader. DPP spokesman Cheng Wen-tsang maintained that visits by the Dalai Lama are "standard," noting that then Presidents Lee Teng-hui and Chen Shui-bian had received the Tibetan religious leader in 1997 and 2001, respectively.

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16. (C) Some prominent KMT members have also criticized Ma's announcement. Legislative Yuan Speaker Wang Jin-pyng suggested Ma should reconsider, arguing that a visit by the Dalai Lama would be a positive move for Taiwan and would not pose a problem if it focused on religion. KMT legislator Chu Feng-chih also questioned Ma's decision. Emile Sheng, a Blue leaning academic and Taipei City official, suggested to us today that Ma had acted unwisely and he predicted that Ma's statement would backfire.

Comment  
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17. (C) This appears to be another example of Ma's haphazard leadership style. He clearly does not want to do anything that could risk damage to efforts to improve cross-Strait relations. Ma hopes to gain ground on issues such as increased international space, including expanding participation in WHO/WHO. However, many are questioning Ma's judgment in making a statement that is bound to be unpopular with the public and is already attracting strong criticism.  
SYOUNG